
***MORE FROM THE QUARRIES
OF LAST CHANCE GULCH***

West Main Stories

Little has been written about Joseph and Eliza O'Neill

Helena's West Main Street is a neighborhood rich in all the historic elements that characterized the early settlement of Last Chance Gulch. It is also a testament to the enterprise and industriousness of early residents who settled on mining claims and built homes and other structures related to their various businesses. Their stories are preserved, for

the most part, in the buildings they left behind. The written record yields few tantalizing bits and pieces about these early settlers, but in most cases, their accomplishments and contributions are remembered by their descendants, some of whom still live on West Main Street.

The story of Joseph and Eliza O'Neill is unusual because of its rather odd ending, and because, unlike most other early West Main Street residents, the O'Neills had no offspring to perpetuate it. No known photographs of the couple exist, but for some unknown reason, Helena educator W.F. Wheeler compiled short biographies of them, written in 1885 and never published.

A previous generation of Helenans would certainly have remembered Joseph O'Neill, if not for his congenial disposition, then surely for the indelible mark he left on the town. Born of Irish parents in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, O'Neill followed the gold rush to Alder Gulch in Montana Territory, arriving in June of 1864. He was 23, single, and full of determination. Finding all the paying claims already staked, O'Neill worked in the mines for \$6 a day until winter set in. The following February, he set out for Last Chance Gulch, having



O'Neill's Hay Market and Feed Stables was torn down in 1889 to make way for the Power Block.

Montana Historical Society photo

heard the stories of rich gold strikes there. Once again, O'Neill found all the claims already staked. On the advice of older miners, he passed up an opportunity to buy the famous Claim Number 5 for \$400, which later made a fortune for its owners.

That spring, 1865, O'Neill prospected on several nearby claims he had secured, and by fall he had enough capital to buy teams and wagons. He began a freighting business that took him all over Montana territory and as far south as Ogden, Utah. Disabled by severe frostbite in the spring of 1867, he temporarily quit freighting and settled on West Main Street. Nearby, at the base of a great limestone cliff in Grizzly Gulch, O'Neill built Helena's first lime kiln. The lime he manufactured there was used as mortar in Helena's earliest substantial buildings and homes.

O'Neill and a partner also began a livery business at Sixth and Main. For two decades the business flourished. When the building was torn down in 1889 to make room for the present Power Block, the Herald reported, "The old structure was as hard in appearance as the days to which it belonged, and while it lingered a long while, it was obliged to give way to the march of progress which will sweep from existence all traces of its ever having been!"

Joseph O'Neill married widow Eliza Phyllis Thompson Wearing in 1870. Eliza was born on a British war vessel near Niagara, Canada, the daughter of a sea captain who sailed the great lakes. At 16, Eliza married a prominent Kentucky land owner. When the Civil War dispersed her husband's 40 slaves in 1864, the couple came West with seven or eight thousand dollars' worth of cattle and horses. Some of their stock made it to Montana. The Wearing's eventually settled in Diamond City and did a good dairy business with the miners. Exactly when Eliza became a widow and how she met Joe O'Neill remain a mystery.

O'Neill continued to engage in heavy freighting under contract and hauled the first boiler through the Mullan Tunnel, using skids to get the heavy implement over the soft roads. He hauled heavy machinery to early-day Bozeman, furnished the government with teams and supplies, and for a time had the mail contract between Helena and Rimini. When the tracks of the Northern Pacific Railroad came to Helena in 1883, the enterprising O'Neill



One standing wall of the O'Neill's stone barn still remains on West Main.

bought the first omnibus to transport passengers between the depot and town. His transport business eventually owned and operated all the omnibuses between the depot and the local hotels.

The Panic of 1893 had an impact on West Main Street and its residents. Certainly the lime business, which O'Neill had expanded during the 1870s and 1880s, began to fail since there was not much building during the 1890s. By the end of the century, the business had new owners.

What prompted O'Neill to leave his business interests, Helena, and Eliza behind to move to Lewistown is something of a mystery. He apparently began a new life there as the proprietor of the Gilt Edge-Lewistown stage line which he operated for almost two decades until his death in 1919. This seems a strange ending for a prosperous, well-liked man with so many ties to Helena. His glowing obituary makes no mention of the wife who remained here. The Helena papers failed to even note the passing of this jovial pioneer who played an active role in Helena's transformation from gold camp to permanent community.

Eliza and an adopted son, Charles, remained at the homesite on West Main Street which the couple built in the early 1870s. By 1900, Eliza was 61 and her property mortgaged. The census enters her birth date as 1839, but it is elsewhere recorded as both 1837 and 1838. She was certainly several years older than her husband. Although Eliza was reported to have had five children, none were liv-

ing in 1900. By 1910, she had sold the homesite, but continued to rent the house and live there alone, working as a private nurse. One lifelong West Main resident remembers her quite vividly from his childhood: “I was scared of her. I thought she was a witch. She wore a black shawl and had a ring on every finger. I stayed away from her. But she grew the biggest cabbages I’ve ever seen!” Others remembered Eliza in a more flattering light as a generous, resourceful person and a mainstay of the Episcopal church. She died at the age of 83, a year after Joseph, and was buried in the Benton Avenue Cemetery. Her grave stands alone, flanked by no others and marked with a simple stone that reads: Eliza P. O’Neill, 1838-1920.

The next time you drive out West Main Street, take note of the historic homes that line the street. Watch especially for the O’Neills’ charming white clapboard home, the one standing wall of their stone barn and the ruins of the four lime kilns a little further along on the west side of Grizzly Gulch. This area will soon be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its listing is a fitting tribute to the O’Neills and the many other early West Main residents who helped shape our town. Their stories are not always well documented, but through their efforts and the buildings they left behind, their lives continue to enrich our own.

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